

## Prostate Health

As men approach middle age, they are sometimes troubled by prostate problems. Because it is normal for men to develop symptoms with their prostate as they age, it is difficult to know what is a sign of trouble and what is not. Prostate cancer, which is the second most common cancer in men, is a legitimate health concern. If you are having prostate-related difficulties, you should consult your doctor.

### Symptoms

The prostate is a gland that surrounds the upper part of the urethra (the tube that carries urine from the bladder to the end of the penis) and manufactures a clear fluid that is part of a man's semen. The prostate is located below the bladder and is usually about the size of a walnut. As a man reaches middle age, the prostate can enlarge in size. Because it surrounds the urethra, this swelling causes a problem with urination. Some of the symptoms include:

- Difficulty or hesitancy getting a urine stream started
- Inability to fully empty bladder
- More frequent urination
- Dribbling at the end of urination
- Waking often during the night to urinate

The natural enlargement of the prostate with age is called Benign Prostate Hypertrophy (BPH). It affects 10 million men in the United States. A majority of cases are mild and require no medical intervention. A physician, though, should check out any symptoms to rule out more serious problems, including prostate cancer or prostatitis (an infection of the prostate). Once a diagnosis of BPH is made, the doctor will continue to monitor the condition for any signs of progression.

Because an enlarged prostate is so common as men age, many do not feel it deserves medical attention. However, there is a danger in leaving a progressively enlarging prostate untreated. In some cases, the bladder will eventually be unable to ever fully empty, leaving it open to infection and kidney stone formation from the urine that remains.

Some of the symptoms of an enlarged prostate can also signal the early stages of prostate cancer. This is another reason why a physician's examination is so important if you are experiencing any problems with your prostate.

A doctor will try to establish what is causing prostate difficulties in several ways. The first is a manual rectal exam. A prostate that feels hard or has nodules (bumps) could indicate cancer. An exam will likely also include a PSA (prostate-specific antigen) blood test, which measures levels in the blood of a protein made by cancer cells. Lastly, an ultrasound image of the prostate may be taken to study its appearance.

### Treatment

If a doctor diagnoses that symptoms are indeed the result of BPH, there are several treatment options. The first is medication. A class of drugs called alpha-blockers can relax the muscles of the prostate so that there is less pressure on the urethra. Another type of drug, finasteride, shrinks the prostate by blocking testosterone production. Unfortunately, while this drug seems to be very effective, many men must wait three to six months before getting any noticeable relief.

There have been recent claims that the herbal supplement saw palmetto can shrink an enlarged prostate. One recent study showed that, while it did not reduce symptoms, saw palmetto did reduce the amount of tissue in the prostate. Remember that herbal remedies are still drugs and can interact with other medications, so never take an herbal supplement without first speaking to your doctor.

If the prostate enlargement is severe, surgical treatment may be recommended by a doctor. The most common, called a TURP (transurethral resection of the prostate), can be performed without an incision. A small scope is passed through the penis and the urethra into the prostate. A tiny remotely operated instrument at the end of the scope then carves away excess tissue in the inner prostate so that urine can flow through the urethra more easily.

This procedure offers marked relief in most men. However, approximately 15 percent of the men who undergo the procedure experience some complications, including impotence, infection and urinary incontinence. Recently, surgeons have begun using a laser version of this procedure, which appears to offer better success rates.

If the enlargement has progressed too far for TURP or laser methods to be successful, prostate removal may be recommended. This is only performed in extreme cases, though, since after removal there are high incidences of impotence and urinary incontinence.

## Prostate Cancer

If tests show prostate cancer, treatment options will differ. Because prostate cancer advances relatively slowly, make sure you know all your treatment options and you feel comfortable with what your doctor advises. If you have any doubts, do not hesitate to get a second opinion.

- **Watchful waiting:** A study of men who died in their fifties of unrelated causes found that up to 30 percent of them had undiagnosed prostate cancer. When this study was performed on men in their eighties, that figure was up to 75 percent. This information has led to a growing controversy in the treatment of prostate cancer. A man can live for years with his cancer being confined to the prostate gland, whereas treatment could disrupt his sexual and physical wellness. That is why some doctors advocate "watchful waiting" as a treatment option when prostate cancer is diagnosed. This method of treatment involves carefully monitoring regular blood PSA and biopsy results to watch for the growth of cancer. Not everyone is a candidate for this option; your doctor will review a variety of factors to determine if this treatment is appropriate.
- **Surgery:** If surgical intervention is necessary, one of the most common treatments is prostate removal (radical prostatectomy). In almost 90 percent of cases diagnosed at an early stage, this procedure eliminates cancer completely without any additional treatment. Unfortunately, one of the surgery's most common side effects is impotence.
- **Radiation therapy:** This is used not only in cases where the cancer is confined to the prostate but also when it has spread to surrounding tissue. This therapy involves using radiation to kill cancer cells. If radiation is unsuccessful in eliminating cancer on its own, it can be followed up with surgery. Like surgery, radiation leaves many men impotent.
- **Seed implantation (brachytherapy):** The latest in prostate cancer treatment, brachytherapy is another form of radiation. Instead of being applied externally, though, the radiation is implanted directly into the prostate in small seeds. This is done using a thin needle. This treatment is also the subject of much controversy. Because it is so localized, side effects of the radiation are supposed to be minimal while the treatment is just as effective as traditional radiation. However, doctors do not agree on the effectiveness of this treatment, and no long-term studies have been performed.
- **Hormone therapy and chemotherapy:** Both of these treatments are generally only used when cancer has spread beyond the prostate. Because most prostate tumors (85 percent) depend on the male hormone testosterone to grow, hormone therapy that blocks testosterone production can slow

down cancer's advance. Unfortunately, hormone therapy is usually effective for only one to three years, at which point the body builds up a resistance to the treatment. Side effects of this treatment, such as loss of libido, nausea and hot flashes, are common, affecting close to 50 percent of patients. When hormone therapy is ineffective, chemotherapy is occasionally used. Anti-cancer drugs are given to the patient in order to slow down tumor growth and its accompanying pain. The side effects vary with each person and can range from mild to severe. The most common side effects are nausea, vomiting, fatigue, hair loss and mouth sores.

Treatment options for prostate cancer are a complex and controversial issue. It can be helpful to seek the advice of more than one physician and talk to other prostate cancer patients. Your local hospital should be able to refer you to a support group.

The key to a successful recovery from prostate cancer is early detection. So even if you think you are in perfect health, make sure you see your doctor for an annual physical.

## Resources

- American Cancer Society: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- Prostate Cancer Foundation (PCF): [www.pcf.org](http://www.pcf.org)
- Prostate Cancer Research Institute: [www.prostate-cancer.org](http://www.prostate-cancer.org)
- The National Cancer Institute: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

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